

Louis Riel School Division launches water-safety pilot for Grade 3, 4 students

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LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

ELEMENTARY students are diving into water-safety lessons, both in public pools and on decks in Winnipeg, through a new pilot project.

The Louis Riel School Division is launching its Swimming Counts program this week.

A total of \$100,000 has been earmarked to develop a how-to-swim program for Grade 3 and 4 students in southeast Winnipeg.

Ryan Palmquist, a father of three young children and the representative for Ward 3, pitched the new line item.

"I teach my kids swimming and take them to the pool as often as I can on my own but as a parent, I have struggled, for years, to get them into actual, formal swimming lessons," said Palmquist, who has a toddler and two elementary schoolers.

His idea to offer water-safety 101 during school hours stemmed from firsthand frustrations, as well as the City of Winnipeg's chronic lifeguard shortage.

Odd working hours, including evenings and weekends, are a challenge when it comes to recruiting lifeguards, said Palmquist, an executive assistant for Coun. Matt Allard (St. Boniface) between 2014-2022.

The first-term trustee recalled fielding complaints from Allard's constituents after every swimming registration day.

He echoed many callers' concerns. That realization was one of the reasons he decided to mount a 2022 campaign in River Park South, he said.

Fellow members of the St. Vital-based board ultimately endorsed the proposal. They voted in favour of it in March as part of their latest budgeting process.



SUPPLIED

Ryan Palmquist, a father-trustee who was first elected in 2022, to represent River Park South constituents, has advocated for the Louis Riel School Division to launch a learn-to-swim program.

Palmquist celebrated their approval by dressing up in a hot-pink floatie outside division headquarters on St. Mary's Road.

The school division has since partnered with the city to develop programming and sent permission slips home with students.

Six schools are taking part in the rollout: Lavallee, Provencher, Victor Mager, St. George, Glenwood and Victor H.L. Wyatt.

Senior administration indicated this group was chosen based on socio-economic data so children whose families might not be able to afford private lessons, get the first chance to learn to swim through the division.

Chief financial officer Jamie Rudnicki estimated there will be 475 swimmers, and overall expenses for the program will be under budget.

Participants will complete one dry-land lesson, followed by three in-pool sessions.

Each child's comfortability

in the water and related skills will be assessed in-depth when their class gets into a public pool for the first time.

Rudnicki said outings are scheduled for Pan Am Pool, Elmwood Kildonan Pool and Cindy Klassen Recreation Complex, none of which are within the division's borders.

Leaders plan to redirect lessons to Niakwa Park's Bonivital Pool when it reopens after renovations, he said.

While noting division staff are travelling off-site, Rudnicki said city-employed lifeguards are running lessons, starting Wednesday.

The Seven Oaks School Division's 10-week swimming program was established to equip all Grade 4 students in north Winnipeg with basic water-safety skills.

The division, which encompasses Garden City, the Maples and surrounding communities, has certified swim instructors on staff.

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